

Midway Resident Restores Link To The Past

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It sounds like a scene from a movie: unsuspecting renter in an old home finds a loose floorboard in the attic, uncovering from decades of dust a hidden treasure that will forever change the lives of those around her.

But for Midway resident Leslie Smith, this is no movie—this is real life.

In the old Van Wagoner home

Smith was renting, she dislodged an attic floorboard and uncovered a stack of dry-glass plate negatives. Recognizing that there was probably great historical value to such a find, she gave them to Darlene Shelton, President of the Hawthorne Camp of the Daughters of the Utah Pioneers.

Jim Jenkins also got wind of the find, and being an avid historian and genealogy buff, as well as a professional photographer

(he owns his own business, Earth Impressions Photographic Arts), he was anxious to get his hands on the plates. He volunteered to donate his time and materials to develop the negatives, making a set for the Daughters of the Utah Pioneers to display, as well as one for his own records, hoping that there would be someone who could identify the people in the photographs.

It would not be an easy process. According to Jenkins, the plates were in "atrocious condition" when found. He could only apply a very mild cleansing solution to the glass sides of the plates, leaving the emulsion side still badly marred. To put the negative plates in good shape would take a high degree of manipulation and an incredible amount of time. "A labor of love," as described by Jenkins. "The nature of the plates is far from advanced," he said, "Their condition and original manufacturer, plus the less than excellent quality of exposure has produced huge contrast swings in the finished negative. Some were badly overexposed, others drastically underexposed. A great deal of manipulation is required to produce the final print.

It may sound easy for me to be critical," explained Jenkins, "but believe me, I do understand the difficulties of a photographer producing good work in his day." Jenkins estimates, through his own experience with photographic history, that the negatives were produced around the turn of the century.

The type of cut on the glass, the thickness, and the absence of brush strokes in the laying of the emulsion are all signs of dry plate negatives that were used from 1881-1925.

Jenkins takes advantage of modern computer technology to enhance the photos he produces from the plates and draw from the negative the finest final print. After countless hours in his photo lab, Jenkins magically lifts from the dark, dirty plates an entire world of people and places from days gone by, and that is the real treasure.

"As a photographer and a genealogist, I find these are precious gems, especially for those that have any knowledge of what it takes to make them," Jenkins asserted.

Several recognizable landmarks from the Heber Valley are discernable through the years, including the original Midway 1st ward building house and what is now known as Memorial Hill. There is even an image of what is assumed to be one of the first Midway harvest festival celebrations (the precursor to Swiss Days).

Thirty-three of the 40 glass plates are valuable portrait prints. Nameless faces stare up from the past, waiting for their story to be told. Children posing with grinning expressions, parents standing straight and proud, horses and buggies, festival tents, even an army camp from Fort Douglas that had come to the valley to do maneuvers.

But there is no one to identify

these people. Not yet, that is. This Saturday, May 6th, all of the prints will be shown, printed at full size or larger and computerized onto a huge display at the Midway Stake Family History and Genealogy Fair at the Midway LDS Stake Center. Anyone who is interested, and especially those with ancestry in the Heber Valley, is invited to come and see if they can identify any of the figures in the portraits.

Jenkins, who is creating the

display for the stake, will also offer copies of the prints to any who would like them. Should anyone make an identification, contact Jim Jenkins at 654-0818.

Discovering the stories behind the faces will bring the photos to life and reveal their true inestimable value. And as the fragmented pieces are carefully puzzled back together, the hidden treasures of the past will live again.





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